

9
Scripture Difficulties Consider'd.

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S E R M O N *9*

Preach'd in the
CATHEDRAL CHURCH
O F
St. PETER EXON,

On *Thursday Aug. 31. 1732.*

A T T H E

Anniversary Meeting of the Gentlemen
educated at the Free-School there.

By **JOHN CONYBEARE, D.D. Rector**
of *Exeter College in Oxford.* *K*

Publith'd at the Request of the STEWARDS.

O X F O R D,

Printed at the THEATER for *Sam. Wilmot:*
and are to be Sold by *J. J. and Paul Knap-*
ton, R. Knaplock, Will. Innys, T. Astley, J.
Crownfield in St. Paul's Church-Yard, Lon-
don. 1733.

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This Discourse,
publish'd at their Request,
is,
with all Respect,
Dedicated

By

their most Obedient

Humble Servant,

John Conybeare.

as Henry Northwick Esq

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John Compton

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S E R M O N

Preach'd at

St. Peter's EXON.

2 PETER III. 16.

— *In which are some things hard to be understood; which they that are unlearn'd and unstable wrest, (as they do also the other Scriptures,) to their own Destruction.*

TH O' the Words now read have a particular Reference to the Writings of St. Paul, yet I shall crave leave to treat them in a larger and more extensive View. The Observation of our Apostle is equally applicable to other Parts of the sacred Scriptures; and St. Paul is by no means the only Writer misunderstood by some, and perverted by others.

Difficulties, of one Kind or other, may be met with in almost every Part of the Bible; — abundantly sufficient to exercise our Dili-

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gence, and abate our Pride. And indeed on any other Supposition than this, there would be less Occasion to devote a whole Body of Men to the Study of these Writings: The Labours of so many Learned Persons to illustrate and explain them would be vain: and the differing Opinions, sometimes observable concerning the same Passages, would be perfectly unaccountable. Self-evident Truths are equally acknowledg'd by the learned and the ignorant: and Points obvious to be understood are not apt to create much Dispute amongst the knowing.

However, tho' we readily confess that Difficulties occur in the sacred Writings, yet this will be no Matter of Wonder to sober and thinking Men. It is no more than might reasonably be expected in Books of so old a Date; and especially, where so many Aids are wanting fully to explain them. The Books themselves were doubtless compos'd with as much Clearness as was proper; and these Perplexities arise, not from any original Obscurity in the Writers, but from the Nature of the Subjects concerning which they treat, and the Infelicity of the present Times.

It is remarkable that Difficulties, more or less, occur in all ancient Writings whatsoever. The Errors of Transcribers are sometimes impossible to be corrected. Dead Languages cannot be so perfectly understood as those which are in common Use. A bold and figurative manner of Expression, familiar to some of the ancients, is remote from the common Forms of writing. And the Memory of some things al-
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luded to, and well known in the Author's Times, may be entirely lost to us. These, and several other Causes, must unavoidably spread some sort of Darkness on ancient Writings; and prevent our accounting for each particular with the same Exactness, as tho' we liv'd when these Books were wrote. So that Difficulties are far from being peculiar to the sacred Scriptures: They are common to all ancient Books whatsoever: and must arise from the ordinary Circumstances and Condition of things.

It is true indeed, as Books which are meerly human, are of less Consequence to us than those of Sacred Original, so Mistakes about them, are of less Moment and Concern; and therefore we cannot but wish for a more compleat Knowledge in those later Writings, than the former. Yet still there is no just Reason for Complaint. Points of absolute Necessity to be known, are laid down with a Clearness suitable to their Importance. Every Man of common Capacity, by using the proper Means of Instruction, may satisfy his Mind about them. And as to others of a lower and less momentous Kind, --- tho' it becomes us not to undervalue them, yet we ought not to become anxious that Difficulties arise about them. The Scriptures, under the present Light we enjoy, *are sufficient to make us wise unto salvation*; and fully to answer the great Purposes propos'd in giving them. The several Particulars involv'd in Obscurity, are of such a Nature, that however a more exact Knowledge of them might gratify the Curious, --- or perfect the Learned, --- or edify

edify and improve the Serious, yet our Salvation is secure without it: And therefore we have more Reason to adore the Goodness of God for the Light we enjoy, than disquiet or torment ourselves that He hath not vouchsaf'd us greater.

The Remarks offer'd, are not, I conceive, entirely useless. But yet, as the Subject before us is of great Importance, I shall not content myself with loose and general Observations. I shall chuse rather to pursue this Point more distinctly; and prepare the Way to solve and account for the principal Questions which arise from it.

To this Purpose I shall begin with an Attempt To State and Limit the Point I am treating of; and to Shew, How far we admit that there are Difficulties in the Sacred Writings.

It will be proper, in the next Place, to Enquire particularly, From Whence these Difficulties do arise.

After which, I shall apply the Consideration of the Matter before us to its proper Ends and Uses.

In order to State the Point I am treating of it may be observ'd, that the Word *Difficulty* is a relative Term; not only as it implies a respect to the Understanding, but likewise as it supposes some Disproportion between the Point offer'd, and the Apprehension of that Person to whom 'tis offer'd. Intellectual Difficulties are Things of such a Kind, that they either entirely elude our Labours, or at least require some uncommon Pains in order to account for them.

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But, as the Attainments and Opportunities of different Persons are various, so it is evident that Matters propos'd to their Apprehensions must be variously either difficult or easy. Natural Sagacity, A good Education, The Command of Books, The Conversation of the Learned, and the like, give mighty Advantages to one Man above another; and make those Things appear plain and obvious, which in other Circumstances would be exceedingly difficult and perplexing.

The Use I would make of this Reflexion is This; The Difficulties I am concern'd with at present, are those only which perplex the Learned and the Skilful. The clearest and most obvious Writings may appear hard to those Persons who are unus'd to Thinking: And it is scarce possible to express any Thing so plainly as to prevent all Mistakes in the Ignorant and Inattentive. We are now treating Not concerning those Things which escape the Apprehensions of Some only, but of those, which either exceed or try the Abilities of All: --- of those, which arise rather from the Condition of the Writing, than the Quality of the Reader.

We may observe, in the next Place, That as a Foundation of natural and acquir'd Sense is necessary for the right Apprehension of any Writings whatsoever, so it is farther requisite that great Care be us'd in the Search, and the several Means and Opportunities embrac'd, which may be serviceable to explain them. Persons therefore, of the greatest Attainments, must call in every Aid which can be had; -- must have

have Recourse to the several Arts and Sciences; and draw Light not only from their own past Observations, but the various Attempts and Labours of the Learned. Points, which may be settl'd by an ordinary Care this way, are out of the present Question; and those only which resist our Pains, and either still remain obscure, or demand some uncommon Labour, ought to be rank'd under the Head of Difficulties we are now considering. *The Scriptures were written for our Learning*; and therefore require the same Attention which is necessary in any other Science. They were design'd to inform our Minds, but not to excuse our Sloth.

It will be scarce needful to add, That Prejudice and Passion are apt to cast a Darkness over the plainest Things; That there is no guarding against the Perverseness of Mankind: And therefore we are perfectly unconcern'd about those Mistakes, which arise from the ill Temper of Men themselves; and are owing rather to their own Partiality, than to any real Doubtfulness in the Sacred Writings.

Having laid down these preliminary Remarks, I shall note farther, that the Difficulties now in View may be reduc'd under Two general Heads; Those, namely, which regard Expression, --- or relate to things signify'd by the Expressions. These also are sometimes combin'd together, and form a mix'd Kind of Difficulties compos'd of both.

In reference to Expression, I conceive we are no ways concern'd about mere Niceties; --- Things which employ, or torture the Critick.

tick. Such are Matters of Curiosity only; and may be overlook'd by those who have greater Things in View.

But we are more concern'd, when 'tis difficult to fix any proper Meaning on the Words; --- or the Terms us'd are of so uncertain a Sense, that we know not how to settle them. These are Cases which sometimes happen. From the former entire Ignorance arises; and the later is attended with Doubtfulness or Error.

Difficulties as to Things signified by Expressions may relate either to *Facts*, *Arguings*, or *Propositions*.

When Facts seem to be differently related in different Places, --- or told with some odd Circumstances, --- or mention'd without sufficient Exactness as to Time or Place, the Reader will be at a Loss; and it may require no ordinary Labour to adjust and set all at rights.

Arguments will be obscure, if we do not sufficiently distinguish between those Reasonings which are conclusive in themselves, and those which are intended only to convince the Persons to whom they are offer'd; --- If they are express'd in a short and imperfect Manner; Built on Principles granted by the Adversary, and therefore not distinctly mention'd by the Writer; Or, Lastly, If they are mix'd with Allusions to certain Matters now entirely unknown.

Propositions may be thought difficult, when we know not the Grounds and Reasons of their Truth; --- When they are express'd in such a general Way that we cannot precisely state and
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limit them; --- When our Ideas are obscure and imperfect; and Questions may be rais'd about them, the Solution of which is hard or impossible. I shall crave Liberty to apply these Remarks to our present Purpose.

But in order to this, it will be proper to take a general View of the Sacred Scriptures, and to reduce the several Parts of these likewise under certain Heads. From hence it will best appear How far any of the aforementioned Difficulties may be imputed to them; How far we either admit an Obscurity in these Writings, or contend that they are clear and plain.

The Scriptures then may be consider'd under these several Views; Either as Historical Narrations of something past, --- or Prophetical Accounts of something future, --- or Doctrinal Collections of certain Truths propos'd to our Belief, --- or lastly, as a System of Rules and Precepts for the Conduct of Life. Reasoning and Argument being mix'd indifferently with several of these, and made Use of to evince and support them, will fall in with some of the Heads already mention'd. To proceed;

We do admit readily, that there are some Difficulties in Expression dispers'd thro' the several Parts of Scripture. Some Passages occur, on which 'tis no easy Matter to fix a Meaning; and others are capable of various Interpretation. But then we should observe withal, That this is common to other Writings of ancient Date; --- That from the Circumstances of the Place it is evident a Solution of these Difficulties

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is of small Importance ; --- That Terms of doubtful Import are sometimes determin'd from the Reason of the Thing, or from parallel Places : --- And where this can't be done, Things must be left, in the same Latitude in which the Scripture hath deliver'd them : Nothing can be more plain than this, Where Expressions are entirely indeterminate, our Faith must be so too.

We do admit, in the next Place, That the Historical Narrations are sometimes involv'd in Obscurity. The Writers content themselves with a general Account, without descending to minute particulars. The several Circumstances of Time and Place are sometimes either entirely omitted, or imperfectly deliver'd. The Grounds and Reasons of certain Actions are scarce hinted at. And different Writers, speaking variously concerning the same Things, at first Sight are thought to disagree. Upon these Accounts, and several others which might be mention'd, Questions will arise concerning Historical Passages, to which it is not obvious to give an Answer. But yet Difficulties of this Kind have, many of them, been accounted for by Care and Pains. We are oblig'd to the Learned and the Pious for their Labours ; whose past Successes give Grounds to hope for more full and compleat Discoveries. However, even as Matters now stand, we deny that any Conclusions can be drawn from hence to the Prejudice of Scripture. The general Facts are sufficiently supported by the clear Testimonies we enjoy : and the Objections alledg'd, tho'

set in their strongest Light, are trifling, if compar'd with positive and direct Evidence. When a Point is once certain, We are no ways oblig'd to satisfy each curious Question about it; and 'tis allow'd in all other Cases, that Difficulties are of no Weight against Demonstration. To pass on;

The Prophecies which occur in Scripture, Either relate to Things yet to come, --- or else have receiv'd their Accomplishment already.

In reference to those which regard Matters as yet future, it is sufficient if we discover some of the greater and more general Points. It is confess'd that various Things relating to them are conceal'd in Darknes; and perhaps will never be distinctly known till accomplish'd: But Then, (whenever it shall happen,) all Difficulties of this Kind will cease: The Event, which verifies, will explain the Prediction, and add a new Evidence to the Religion we profess.

But it might perhaps be expected, that every Thing should be clear as to Prophecies fulfill'd already: That these having receiv'd the best Explanation they are capable of, by the real Event of the Things predicted, should be manifest: and that no Difficulties could be rais'd about them by serious and skilful Christians. Yet we know the Differences of Learned Men on this Head. This is a Proof, (if we wanted others,) that all Things are not plain and easy; and therefore some Obscurities must be granted here likewise.

However it should be observ'd, that we, at this Distance of Time, are plac'd in Circumstances

stances vastly different from what those were, who liv'd in the more early Ages. Those who were Witnesses to the Accomplishment of these Predictions, discern'd their Accomplishment in a fuller and stronger Light. Many Circumstances were known to them, to which we are utter Strangers: And therefore many particulars in the Prophecies themselves are obscure to us, which to Them were clear and plain.

To this I shall only add here, That Infidels can draw no Advantages from hence. All the Great Events predicted, if fulfill'd, can certainly be prov'd to be so: and, if they are not yet fulfill'd, we still expect their Accomplishment. Mere Circumstances are of little Weight when compar'd with important and momentous Facts. Of these we are sure, however at a Loss about lesser Matters: and the Certainty of the One is an over-balance for the Obscurity of the other.

Doctrinal Matters are of Two Kinds: Either Fundamental and necessary Truths; or Points of such a Nature, that, however in themselves true, yet the explicit Belief of them is not necessary to Salvation. Each of these may likewise be consider'd under a double View; --- either in reference to their general Truth, or the particular Explication of them.

Doctrines, absolutely necessary to Salvation, are plainly express'd in Scripture. And if some Texts, in which they are contain'd, are less clear and determinate, yet others cannot be mistaken by a thinking and sober Man. Thus much we affirm in reference to their Truth.

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But then, the particular Explication may be arduous. In Matters of this high Nature it becomes us to be modest, and not to decide with too much Arrogance. The general Truth is plainly deliver'd; and the Authority of the Teacher will make it certain: But we want a Sufficiency of Light to solve every curious Question; and therefore Difficulties may arise from hence. Points of this Kind are easy to be understood, but impossible to be comprehended.

Doctrines not Fundamental are more or less clearly deliver'd in proportion to their general Importance. They depend, for the most part, on a Variety of Texts, in which the clear and determinate must explain the doubtful. Or if any of them are involv'd in so much Darkness, that a serious and good Man may mistake about them; the Error will be excus'd by a Good and Merciful Being. The explicit Knowledge of such Points as these, serves rather to Improve, than Constitute the Christian: And therefore the compleat Attainment of it must be esteem'd the peculiar Happiness of some, and not the necessary Duty of all.

Amongst these also, Some are of an high and arduous Nature: --- Matters, however certain as to the Truth of the Proposition, are yet dark and mysterious as to the Explication: But, (as I mentioned before,) it is sufficient that we understand the Truth, tho' unable distinctly to unfold the Article.

Once more; we may consider the Scriptures as a System of Rules and Precepts for the Conduct

duct of Life: And Rules of this Kind are either of a moral Nature, or a positive.

The Moral Rules are plain and clear in every respect: --- Deliver'd with the utmost Simplicity, and enforc'd by the strongest Motives; so that he who errs in these, must be entirely without Excuse.

Matters of positive Institution are plain and clear as to the Meaning of the Precept, tho' possibly in some other respects involv'd in Darkness. Thus, it is no easy Matter to account distinctly for all the several Institutions of the Jewish Law. We know not the particular Reasons of all of them: And therefore, are unable to answer each nice Question which may be started about them. But then, We are certain of This, If they were prescrib'd by God, His Authority will demand Obedience. We may conclude, If the Grounds and Reasons of Many of them appear, Others may be founded on equal Reasons, tho' not apparent: For the same Wisdom which is clear in some, was equally concern'd in all.

To what hath been offer'd I shall crave leave to add farther, That as Arguments and Reasonings are intermix'd with several Parts of Scripture, so the Meaning and Force of these Reasonings is not always evident. And yet we may assure ourselves, from various Considerations, that there is a real Force in these Reasonings, however involv'd and preplex'd they may appear. Perhaps we do not sufficiently distinguish between the several Kinds of Arguing. Perhaps we are not sufficiently appriz'd
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of the Principles on which the Writers built, and the Concessions of those Adversaries with whom they dealt. These, and several other Things of the same Nature, will spread a Darkness over the surest Reasoning.

But however the Matter stands, we have still this Comfort remaining; that where the Argument is obscure the Point concluded is plain and easy: And the Truth inferr'd will equally subsist on the Authority of the Arguer, and the Force of his Reasonings. If this be certain, we are less concern'd about the Difficulties before us. They are Matters rather of Curiosity than Weight: And however they may perplex the Inquisitive, create no Uneasiness to the Serious.

Thus I have attempted a true State of the Subject before us. I shall now proceed to my Second General Head, viz. To Enquire from Whence the before-mention'd Difficulties do arise.

I am in part prevented as to this by several Hints occasionally dispers'd under the former Head: But yet, as the Point is of great Moment, it will be proper to resume it here; To explain myself more distinctly; and to add some farther Observations.

Here then we may remark, That some Account may be given of this Point by considering either the Nature of Language in general, or such Circumstances as concern the Language of Scripture in particular.

As Words are arbitrary Signs of Things, so the same Expressions, which at one Season are
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fix'd and determin'd to a particular Meaning, may in Time acquire a different Sense. They vary according to the Will of those Persons who use them; and gradually receive a Change, either by contracting, or enlarging the Number of those Ideas they represent.

What I have now mention'd is too well known to need the Support of Proof: And from hence every careful Reader may observe that various Difficulties do often arise in ancient Writings. The Language of one Age is scarce understood in another. It is either impoverish'd, or enrich'd. So that, in the one Case, Men cannot come up to that Fulness of Sense represented by their Forefathers; nor, in the other, descend to that Poverty of Meaning, which their Language once carried with it.

Difficulties, we see, must arise from hence, tho' the Books consider'd be wrote in a Tongue familiar. But they will grow upon us exceedingly, when the Language itself ceases to be in common Use; --- when we are oblig'd to depend, in some Degree, on the Skill and Fidelity of Interpreters; and have no Opportunity to ascertain the Sense of Words by our own proper Observations.

Beyond this, (which is common to all ancient Books as well as the Scriptures,) we may add farther, That some Circumstances attend these Writings, which are in a manner peculiar to Them. Thus, the very Language of the Old Testament is observ'd to be doubtful and uncertain. There are no Books now remaining in the same Tongue of equal Date with these.

these. The Expressions which occur in them, are exceedingly bold and figurative. And tho' they appear to be singularly beautiful, when thoroughly unfolded, yet being remote from the present Forms, are of no plain or obvious Interpretation.

Add to this, that The Prophetick Writings are express'd in a Style peculiar to themselves: --- That a tolerable Skill in this, is no ordinary Attainment: --- That Men of the greatest Reputation this Way, are far from an entire Agreement; --- and, in several Points, utterly incapable of deciding with any Shew of Truth. These Things consider'd, it will appear, that Difficulties are so far from being Matter of Wonder, that they cannot but arise according to the common Order and Constitution of Things.

It may be farther remark'd to the same Purpose, That we want the Notice of several Matters either entirely necessary, or highly useful to explain the Scriptures.

If, in the Historical Parts there arise Difficulties, yet Things of that Kind are unavoidable, where Accounts are short and general; and where Writers content themselves with those Matters which serve their Ends of Writing, without descending to those particulars which gratify the Curious. We know that to adjust every Thing of this Nature an exact Acquaintance with the State both of Times and Places is necessary. And yet, the *Chronology* and *Geography* of the Ancients are obscure Subjects. Several Points relating to them cannot be precisely

cisely settl'd: And others can be clear'd only by an accurate Collection of Hints dispers'd thro' various Writings.

But besides that the Shortness of Historical Accounts may sometimes perplex the History, it farther carries this Inconvenience along with it, that Defects here must darken and obscure most other Kinds of Writing. It is scarce possible to treat many Subjects without some Allusion to Facts. These being well known, when the Books were wrote, might need no particular Explication. But, as the general Remembrance of such Things ceases, we are oblig'd to supply it, by having Recourse to written Histories. If These therefore shall fail us, we know not how to repair the Loss. Passages, once clear and easy, will become intricate; and we must content ourselves rather to conjecture plausibly, than to decide peremptorily.

Over and above the Disadvantage which arises from Historical Defects, it may be observ'd, that no small Difficulties may proceed from the Want of coëval Writers. These serve not only to assist in the Explanation of Language, but to give some Light into the Meaning and Intention of cotemporary Authors. Every one knows of what Use they are in explaining the *Greek* and *Roman* Writings. The same Advantages would attend the Scriptures, if we enjoy'd the same Assistancess. But, in reference to the Old Testament, we are entirely destitute here. The Learned inform us, that no *Jewish* Writings remain, which are unquestionably of the

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same Ages; And therefore all Helps, which might be drawn from thence, are utterly lost.

I may be permitted to add, That most Books abound with Allusions to certain Usages of those Ages in which they were written. They cannot therefore be perfectly understood, without a competent Skill this Way: And so far forth as the Knowledge of such Customs is lost, 'tis unavoidable but Perplexities will arise. Here likewise we must be sensible how much we want a Guide. For tho' some Light may be gather'd from different Parts of those Books themselves, and further Instructions may be learnt from successive Jewish Writers, yet Difficulties enough remain both to employ the Learned, and to disappoint their Labours.

Once more, and to have done with the Consideration in Hand. Many Passages are built on, and have a secret Reference to certain Sentiments and Opinions peculiar to those Ages. It was needless distinctly to unfold Matters, well known in those Times, --- but which, at this Distance, we can rather guess at, than determine. If all Things of this Kind were clear, we might easily account for several Matters which now perplex us. The Reasonings of *St. Paul*, in several of his Epistles, would appear in a Light very different from what they do at present; and we should then admire the Wisdom of the *Philosopher*, as well as the Power of the *Apostle*.

In all the Respects before-mention'd, as well as others, on which I have not Time to enlarge, we want Notices, either necessary or useful, completely

pleatly to unfold the Scriptures. Nor is this a Matter in the least to be wonder'd at, since the same Thing happens, in some Degree or other, to most ancient Writings. The World is govern'd according to set standing Rules. From these Providence is not wont to depart, unless for the highest Causes. But the Difficulties we are concern'd with are too slight to justify a Miracle in preventing them. Our Salvation is secure notwithstanding. And a Solution of them would serve rather to Silence the Infidel, than to confirm the Believing.

To the Reasons already alledg'd under this Head, I shall subjoin the Nature of certain Subjects treated of in the Scriptures. The Matters here intended, are, Either Prophecies, or Mysteries.

The Reason of the Thing requires, that Prophecies should be sometimes dark; and that their full Meaning should not be understood till the Things predicted be accomplish'd ^a. Not to insist here, That the Clearness of a Prediction might, according to the common Order of Things, hinder the Fulfilment of it; and that the Supreme Being, tho' He foreknows Mens Actions, yet doth not force them to his Ends; -- I shall only observe, that numberless Inconveniences would arise from a precise Knowledge of Events future. It is equally dangerous to us to know what shall be either our Good, or our Bad Fortune; --- the future Success, or Calamity either of ourselves, or our Posterity.

^a See this Subject accurately handl'd by Dr. Jenkins in his *Reasons of Christianity* Vol. 2. p. 175. &c. Ed. 4.

The One might produce Security, --- the Other perhaps Despair: And we should be strongly tempted to make an ill Use of the Present, by too distinct a Prospect of what is to come. And yet Prophecies, in Reference to these Things, are, in some Cases, highly useful. They are awakening Evidences of the Superintendence of an All-wise Being. But then, as they are often given rather with a View to future Times, than those in which they were written; so the distinct Explication of them must be reserv'd to those Times likewise.

Mysteries are Points, in which The Supreme Being hath imparted some Knowledge to us; --- but the Revelation stopping there, several Questions to be rais'd about them are obscure. Difficult therefore they must be, unless our Notions concerning these Things were more full and determinate; --- unless our Capacities were greater, and the Revelation itself more complete.

Yet, tho' it hath pleas'd the Divine Wisdom to discover these Things to us but in Part, no Prejudices can arise from hence to the Cause of Religion. There lay no Original Obligation on God to reveal Things of this Kind at all; much less to reveal them in any fuller Measure of Perfection. If Mysteries there are in the Christian Faith, yet such Points were greater Mysteries before this Faith was deliver'd. The Scripture doth not make, but suppose them; and instead of darkening, it casts some Light upon them.

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If it be still ask'd, "Why Matters of this Kind are not unfolded in a clearer Manner," it may be added, That in some respects even Language itself is unable to express them. Words are the immediate Representations of our Thoughts; and consequently, can reach no farther than our Thoughts themselves. The Things therefore, of which we have hitherto had no manner of Notion, cannot be perfectly represented in our Words: From whence it follows, that to clear up some things in reference to Divine Doctrines, an immediate Inspiration to each particular Person would be necessary; --- a new Language to express such Matters, and new Ideas to understand the Language.

And after all that can be suppos'd this Way, as ours is a finite Nature, it is impossible but some Things must exceed our Knowledge. There is no Proportion between *Finite* and *Infinite*: And therefore, as the Mysteries Doctrines contain'd in Scripture do chiefly relate to Subjects of an infinite Extent, our Knowledge concerning them may be infinitely improving, and yet never perfect. These are Matters above the State and Condition of our Nature; and Difficulties must arise, as well from the Greatness of the Things declar'd, as the Manner of revealing them.

I must not conclude this Head without taking Notice of an Objection, which may possibly be alledg'd here. It may be said, that a Distinction should be made between those Difficulties which have arisen from Length of Time, and those which St. *Peter* tells us sub-

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sisted in the Apostolick Age; --- That the Arguments, hitherto produc'd, relate only to the former; --- And that a Discourse form'd on the Confession of *St. Peter*, ought to account for those Difficulties to which his Words refer. To which may be added, That unless some Account be given of this Matter, the Objection drawn from Scripture Difficulties will remain in Force. For, To affirm "that something of this Kind must arise in Course of Time," will be to no Purpose, if much the same subsisted even in the early Ages. A Solution of this may be demanded; and I obey.

It should be observ'd therefore, that when *St. Peter* wrote, there might be two Sorts of Difficulties subsisting; Those namely which regarded the Old Testament, and those which concern'd certain Writings in the New. The Text seems to respect both: For, whilst 'tis allow'd, that in the Writings of *St. Paul*, there are *some Things hard to be understood*, it is added, *which they that are unlearn'd and unstable wrest, as they do also THE OTHER SCRIPTURES, to their own Destruction.*

Difficulties then, which subsisted with regard to the Old Testament, must have been of much the same Nature with those I have already handled; Such, for the most part, as arose from Length of Time, and the Distance there was between the Prophetick and the Apostolick Ages. These indeed may have been increas'd since by the several Accidents which succeeding Centuries have brought with Them. But if Matters of that Kind did really perplex Men
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in the Apostles Times; as we may ascribe them to the same Causes, so we may defend our Faith in the same Ways I have before suggest-
ed.

But, it may perhaps be thought that every Thing should have been plain at the Time when the Scriptures were first publish'd; in Writings which record our very Faith; and which were compos'd for the Service of that Age at least, in which they were deliver'd. Yet, *St. Peter* owns, that Difficulties there were in the Writings of *St. Paul*, a Person of first Rank amongst the Apostles, and *who labour'd more abundantly than they all*.

Upon this give me Leave to demand, What were the Difficulties to which *St. Peter* refers? Did they relate to Matters of a mysterious Nature? If so, the Reflexions, before offer'd on that Point, will be of equal Use here. Did they concern Prophecies of certain Events to be accomplish'd in future Time? Things of that Kind have likewise been consider'd already. Or, did they arise from our Apostles Method of arguing, and handling certain Subjects before him? If That were the Case, it may be proper to consider the Matter more closely.

It is observable of *St. Paul*, that as he enjoy'd the Advantage of a learned Education, and had made a more than ordinary Progress in Science, so his Reasonings are much deeper than those we meet with in the rest of the Apostles. Now, from such as these it is no Wonder if some Sort of Difficulties do arise;
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such at least as perplex the unlearned, and which they may sometimes interpret wrong. These are the Persons, who are said to have wrested the Writings of *St. Paul*. *St. Peter* affirms it expressly. And therefore, no sufficient Objection can be drawn from hence, without maintaining, that a Writer ought not to employ his Talent for the Service of Some, unless they may prove of equal Advantage to All.

Reasonings of this Kind, which can be apprehended only by the Learned, were design'd only for their Service: And therefore, the unlearned, as they are not concern'd in such Matters, can have no Room for Complaint. Such were to be taught in another Way, --- not by Arguing, but Authority. If therefore the several Conclusions, which our Apostle supported by a Course of Reasoning, for the Use of the Learned, were, as to their Meaning, sufficiently plain, the unlearn'd were concern'd to take his Word for the Truth of them; and to remember that *St. Paul* was an Apostle, as well as a Philosopher.

But, there might be another Sort of Difficulties, arising from the Method, in which our Apostle hath treated certain Subjects; And These likewise must be accounted for.

It is readily confess'd, that as to the present Times every Thing is not perfectly clear in *St. Paul's* Epistles; and perhaps some of the same Difficulties might equally have subsisted in the Times of *St. Peter*. This, I say, might be, --- and if we duly consider Matters, shall find, must be. It cannot but arise from the very Nature

ture of Epistolary Writings; in which the Author must frequently hint at Things, with which none can be well acquainted, but those Persons to whom he writes. When these Epistles therefore came to be publish'd, no Wonder if some Obscurities arose; --- no Wonder if Persons, who knew not the State of those Churches, to whom such Epistles were directed, should, in certain particulars, either mistake, or be ignorant. The like happens in all other Cases of the same Kind: and therefore, might reasonably be expected here.

But, it will be demanded perhaps, "Were not these Writings intended for general and lasting Use? Ought they not therefore to be equally intelligible to all Persons, and at all Times?" Such Questions are captious, and should be answer'd with somewhat of Reserve.

The sacred Epistles had a double View; and were compos'd in such a manner, as to be serviceable for a double Purpose: --- I mean, first and principally, to those Persons, for whose Use they were immediately wrote; and, in the next place, but more remotely, to all other Christians either in that, or the succeeding Ages. Both Ends may be, and must be serv'd by them. But then, forasmuch as the Condition of the first Churches had something in it peculiar to themselves, those Parts which more immediately respected their Condition, might, without Impeachment, be obscure to others: And the Intendment of Providence will be fully answer'd, if there be a general and sufficient Clearness as to those Points only, which were

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design'd for common and general Use. No Writings can be reasonably censur'd as obscure and unintelligible, if they are compos'd in such a manner, as to be understood by all those who are concern'd in them, as to those Points in which they are concern'd. To insist on more than this, is to forget the very Nature and End of Writing.

After having assign'd the foregoing Causes of the Difficulties which occur in Scripture, I might go on to examine and refute some unwarrantable Conclusions sometimes drawn from thence.

I might observe, in reference to Infidels, That the Dignity and Authority of the Sacred Writings are still secure; and that Objections built on this Consideration, prove rather the Vanity of those who make them, than any real Weakness in the Religion they oppose.

I might go on and observe farther, in Opposition to the Church of *Rome*, That notwithstanding the Scriptures are, in some respects, of hard Interpretation; --- yet there is no Necessity for a Living and Infallible Guide; Or, if there were, It would be more reasonable to expect that each particular Person should infallibly determine for himself, than that One Man, or One Body of Men should infallibly judge for all. For, the Interpretations made, --- however infallible those may be who make them, cannot absolutely Secure from Error, without an equal Infallibility in the Apprehensions of those Men to whom they are given.

I might, Lastly, remark, against the Determination of some modern Corrupters of Religion, That notwithstanding the Obscurities in certain Doctrines propos'd to our Belief, yet they ought not to be treated as slight and inconsiderable Matters. Every Doctrine deliver'd in Scripture, is profitable at least, tho' not absolutely necessary to be known; and consequently, what we are concern'd to search after and consider with an Attention equal to its Importance. --- But the distinct Prosecution of these particulars would carry me beyond just Bounds. I shall therefore forbear, and pass on to the

Last Head propos'd, viz. To apply the Doctrine hitherto insisted on to its proper Ends and Uses.

We should recollect, that Difficulties in the Subject now treated of, imply, not only those Things of which no sufficient Account can be given, but those likewise which try our Abilities, and cannot be solv'd without considerable Pains and Learning. That such Points there are in the Sacred Writings must be granted on all Hands: And the great Importance of some particulars of this Kind, cannot be disputed by a serious and knowing Christian.

I conceive a good Argument may be drawn from hence for the Reasonableness of a Standing Ministry. The Divine Institution of this Office doth not fall within the Compass of my Design. This is a Subject, however deserving our Meditations, yet beside the present Purpose. But from the Doctrine insisted on the
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Fitness of this Institution will appear; and the Wisdom of Providence in settling so great a Point be manifest.

Nothing can be more clear and certain than This, that we ought to make the best Use possible of the Notices already given us; and consequently, if any Thing of Obscurity shall arise, to apply all the Means to clear such Points within our Power. It is evident, at first View, the State of the World is such, that the Bulk of Mankind cannot unfold these Matters by their own proper Skill and Labour. They want either Parts, or Learning, or Leisure to compass this End. But those Disadvantages which spring from the present Condition of Things, may admit some Remedy in a natural Way. Men, who are incapable of clearing up Matters by their own Study, may receive Assurances from the Studies of others: And Things may be laid open to them by the Endeavours of the Learned, to which the unlearn'd are perfectly of themselves, unequal.

The Scriptures were written in Languages, the Knowledge of which is now confin'd to Persons of a liberal Education: And were they still kept within these Tongues, they must to the Generality of Mankind be useless. But the Piety of various Translators hath laid them open in a good degree, to general Use. Yet, it is noted by the skilful, that however just these Versions may be, as to the main, there are some Inaccuracies in the rendering: And these should be remov'd by Persons of sufficient Skill and Learning.

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But, supposing that every Thing this Way had been justly done; yet the Bulk of Readers will find abundant Difficulties to perplex Them. The very Style itself is not obvious to every one: and there are various particulars which cannot be clear'd without a thorough Acquaintance with several Parts of Science.

Over and above those Points which try the Abilities of the Learned themselves, we should note, that several Matters will be obscure to the Ignorant, which are clear and obvious to the Knowing. These therefore, as well as the former, are needful to be insisted on: Doctrines must be evinc'd and clear'd; Duties explain'd and enforc'd; The crafty Adversary refuted; The erring Christian reclaim'd; The doubting confirm'd; The presumptuous reprov'd; and the desponding comforted. Neither the Knowledge nor the Practice of Religion can be secur'd without a suitable Provision made for them; nor can This be done without the Service of a standing Ministry. The Affairs before-mention'd, (whatever Mens Abilities may be,) cannot be accomplish'd but by Persons entirely devoted to them. Thoroughly to Study, Explain, and enforce the Scriptures, will take up all our Time: And therefore an Employment so arduous and concerning ought not to be consider'd as a Secondary Business, nor entrusted in Hands engag'd in secular Affairs.

If this Arguing be just, we may advance a Step farther, and contend, that a competent Provision ought to be made for the Ministers of the Gospel. They that preach the Word of
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God should certainly live of it; --- be provided for in such a manner as to attend on the Lord without Distraction. No Temptations should be laid in their Way to make up a poor Subsistence by low and sordid Ways of Gain, disreputable to the Man who uses them, and injurious to the very Office he sustains.

Much we owe in this regard, (and we ought to acknowledge it with Gratitude,) to the Piety and Liberality of Christian Princes, by whom Laws have been in several Ages enacted for the Maintenance and Support of the Clergy. And if it happens in particular Instances that the Provisions assign'd fall short, tho' we cannot but lament the Misfortune, it becomes us not to complain. A Foundation is already lay'd to repair these Deficiencies by the Munificence of the Crown, which hath generously parted with its own Rights to relieve us. We may look forward therefore with Comfort, and take a View of Times, in which the Misfortunes we now labour under will be remov'd; in which a suitable Support will be settl'd for all who minister in Sacred Things, and some Amends made for the unhappy Depredations of former Ages. Thus much, I hope, is not improper to have been observ'd. --- But, as the pursuing this Reflexion would carry me off too far from my main Design, I retreat; and beg your Patience whilst I apply the Doctrine hitherto insisted on to some farther Uses and Purposes.

From the Difficulties which occur in Scripture, I have already deduc'd the Necessity of a standing Ministry to interpret these Writings; and

and the Reasonableness of assigning them a competent Support. I shall not strain Matters if I infer, in the next Place, the Wisdom of erecting Schools of Learning for the Improvements of Art and Science; --- of those at least which serve to explain the Scriptures, and by Acquaintance with which Men are prepar'd to officiate in the Sacred Ministry.

Even in the Jewish Times there were Schools and Seminaries of the Prophets; in which the Youth were dispos'd for the Illapses of the Spirit by human and natural Preparations. When our Blessed Lord appear'd, He chose indeed his Twelve Apostles from amongst the Unlearned, that *The Faith* [of his Gospel] *might not stand in the Wisdom of Men, but in the Power of God.* 1 Cor. 2. 5. But then, to supply the Defects of human Attainments they were endu'd with supernatural Skill; and the Knowledge of those necessary Things was deriv'd from above, which they could not learn in an human and ordinary Way. And yet even in those Times Providence did not disdain the Service of St. Paul in propagating the Gospel; who is said to have labour'd in this Cause with extraordinary Vigour, --- and whose Writings afford ample Proofs as well of learned Accomplishments as Divine Inspiration. But if Religion might receive Assistances from the Arts of Learning, even in those Ages when Inspiration prevail'd, we must be sensible how much these Arts are *necessary* in the present Times, when Difficulties in religious Matters are mightily increas'd, and the miraculous Spirit of Interpretation is gone from us. If

If therefore the Acquisitions of human Science be so highly useful and even necessary to this End, the erecting Schools and Seminaries of Learning can need no Apology; The Memories of all those who have either founded or endow'd them will be precious with sober Men; The Publick will think itself concern'd to protect their Rights; No generous Person will envy Them those Possessions which have been deriv'd to them by the Piety either of the former or of present Times; No Learned Man will be found to discourage Learning, --- nor can a good Man entertain a Wish to the Prejudice of Virtue and Religion. Whilst there are these Advantages on their Side, we need be less concern'd at any Attempts of Adversaries against them. If Enemies they have, they must be few; distinguish'd by the Want of those Arts whose Interests they oppose, and of that Religion they are intended to support. Such as these deserve more our Contempt than Hatred; and can never act with considerable Success but against themselves.

I speak not this merely with a View to those venerable Bodies which are design'd for the higher Improvements of Science, but to those likewise which as really, if not equally, serve the same Ends by laying the first Foundations of Knowledge. It is in such as This, --- (which is now honour'd by your publick Regards,) that the Youth are train'd up to Virtue, Diligence, Modesty. It is here that the Seeds of all future Attainments are sown and cultivated; from which being afterwards transplanted, they grow up

up to a full Measure of Perfection. By the Arts, in which they are here instructed, they are qualified to unlock the Treasures of ancient Wisdom; And the Universities themselves do but direct the right Application of that which was first learnt at School.

The Importance then of such Places of Institution for the great Purposes of future Life, is manifest; and will justify all the Countenance which can be given to them, --- even those high Honours they now receive from this numerous Assembly.

But I must not lose Sight of that supreme End of human Learning, which gave Birth to the present Reflexions; --- its Subserviency, I mean, to the Interests of Religion, by leading the way to interpret and explain the Scriptures. These being originally deliver'd in Languages out of common Use, and requiring a good Insight into several Parts of Learning, cannot be clear'd up but by the Assistance of preparatory Studies: Here then must we begin: And it will become us ever to remember, that the Institutions of the School, as the Foundations of a Building, are not less useful or necessary, however their Situation may be thought less honourable, and they are more remov'd from View.

To go on; From the Doctrine insisted on we may conclude, That Christians are oblig'd to read and study these Writings, and to improve in the Knowledge of them in proportion to the Means and Opportunities they enjoy. The Scriptures are the Word of God, and contain the

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Ways and Methods of Salvation. If we consider them in the former View, it is our Duty to study them; If in the later, it is our supreme Interest. But as in all Matters where the End aim'd at is of great Importance, the Difficulties which are met with should excite our Industry, so in the present Case our Engagements are incomparably the greatest; because eternal Salvation is of infinitely higher Moment than any other End whatsoever. If therefore God hath been pleas'd to order Matters so, that Care is necessary as well to learn our Duty as to discharge it, it becomes us to apply ourselves to this Work with Zeal, proportionable to the Greatness of the End aim'd at, and the Difficulties of obtaining it. Let it not be thought that all those Points, which are not plain and obvious at first Sight, are Matters of mere Curiosity. Sentiments of this Kind will prejudice our Faith to a very great Degree; and when thoroughly examin'd will be found to arise from inexcusable Sloth, or secret Infidelity. The true State of the Case is This; Since God hath declar'd his Will to us, we are as really concern'd to examine into the Sense and Meaning of his Declarations, as to adhere to them when rightly understood by us. It is therefore vain to plead that Obscurities arise, and that many Points are difficult and perplexing. This Consideration is so far from excusing our Negligence, that it aggravates the Guilt of it.

I shall advance a little farther, and observe, That as the Duty of studying the Scriptures arises from considering the Difficulties which

occur in them, so from the same Principle we may deduce some general Rules by which to pursue this Study.

It is obvious that all Matters of this Kind require Attention; and therefore the Sacred Writings must not be read by an hasty and careless Eye. As they deserve, so they demand likewise our intensest Thoughts; For, in the Nature of Things, Difficulties cannot be conquer'd but by Pains.

It follows, in the next place, That if Matters of this Kind occur which resist our first Endeavours, we ought not to leave the Work unfinished. A new Attempt may be more successful, and second Labours repair the Miscarriages of the first. Various Aids may be call'd in: New Light may be drawn from Matters not yet consider'd; And the Point, tho' difficult, is not perhaps invincible. It is owing to this Constancy in the Labours of the Learned, that so many Difficulties in Scripture have been clear'd up, and a Foundation lay'd to account for several other Things as yet conceal'd. The same Methods will ever carry on, and advance the same Cause.

But yet, after all, there are some Things in the Sacred Writings which exceed our Capacities: And those which are less arduous cannot be surmounted without the Aids of Grace. This Consideration suggests to us another Rule, viz. That we apply ourselves to this Work with the profoundest Humility of Mind. Of other Books we are Judges; and decide concerning them according to the several Notions we embrace:

brace: But here we come to be judg'd ourselves, and must submit our most favourite Sentiments to the Tryal. Gods Word is entire Truth; --- not to be measur'd by the Prejudices we entertain, nor the scanty Reason of which we are Masters. In these great Points we must submit without Reserve; For Divine Mysteries are not to be disputed, but ador'd.

I shall only add to this, That the Consideration of human Frailty, and the Insufficiency of our corrupted Nature require that we address ourselves to this Work with the greatest Dependence on God: That we beg his Blessing on our Studies; The Aids of his Grace to forward, and the Comforts of his Spirit to support us. If we proceed in This pious Way, The God, who approves, will guide and influence our Labours; will either lead us into the Knowledge of Truth, or preserve us from all dangerous Errours; --- will carry us on in the successful Discharge of our Duty; and at length reward us with eminent Degrees of Glory.

F I N I S.

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